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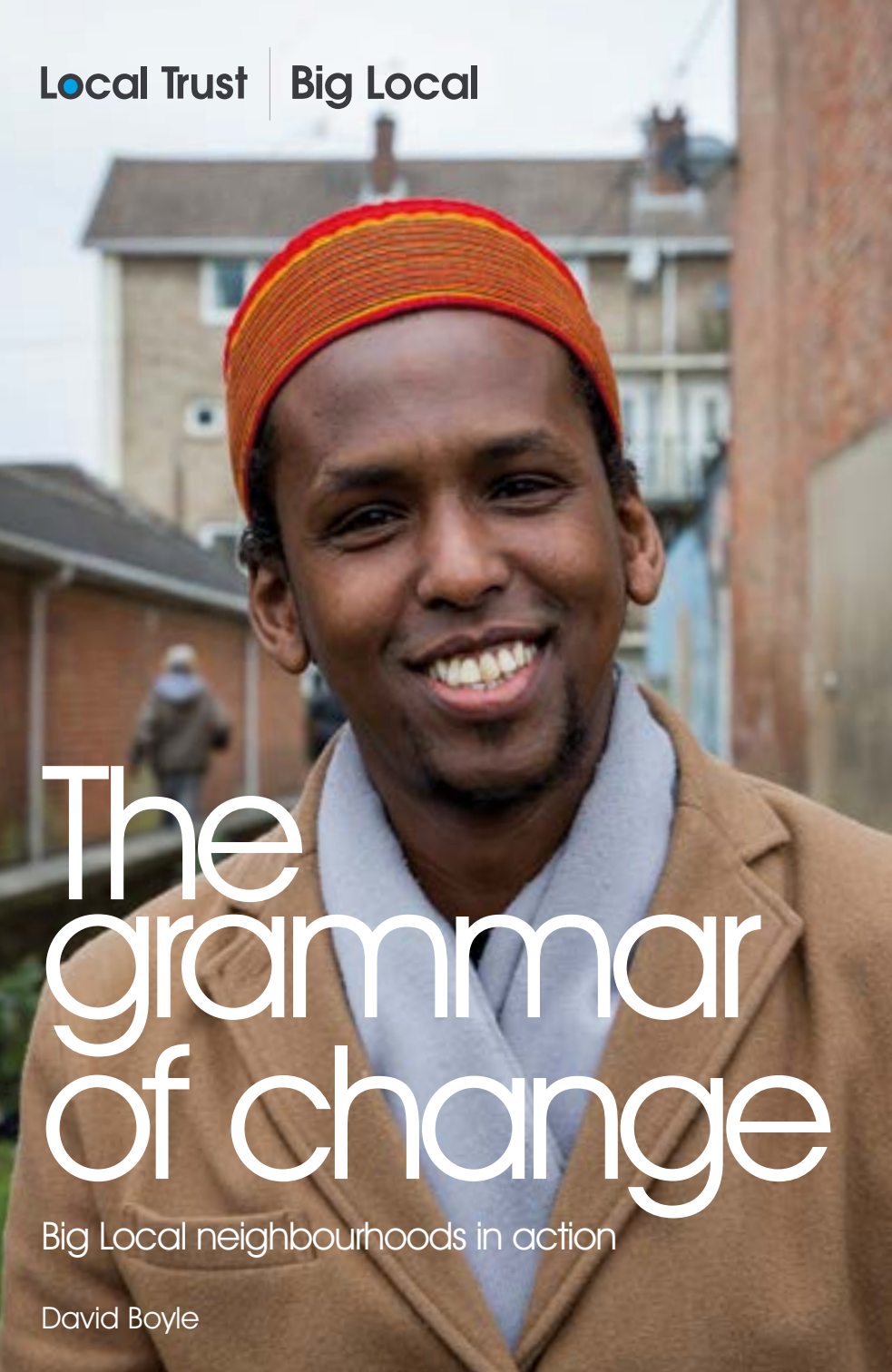

# The grammar of change

## Big Local neighbourhoods in action

David Boyle

## About the author

David Boyle is the author of a range of books about history, social change, politics and the future. He has been editor of a number of publications including Town & Country Planning, Community Network, New Economics, Liberal Democrat News and Radical Economics. He is a fellow of the New Economics Foundation.

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# FOREWORD

The Big Local programme was announced in 2010 by the Big Lottery Fund and formally launched with the establishment of Local Trust in 2012. The intention was to allocate catch-up funding to each of 150 small local areas that faced a range of social and economic challenges, but had been overlooked for lottery funding in the past. This was often because of a lack of the local social and civic infrastructure needed to bring people together to apply for lottery grants or organize themselves to tackle big issues in their community. Big Local was therefore designed from the outset not just to provide funding for projects, but to do so in a way that would build community capacity, confidence and skills in the longer term.

Each Big Local area was awarded £1 million of funding which residents themselves were able to use over ten years to make their communities better places to live. The only requirement placed on those communities was that decisions should be made by local residents, with particular priority given to engaging their community in the decision-making process. Local Trust acted not as a traditional top-down grant funder, rationing and allocating resources on the basis of its

own priorities, but rather as a source of support to areas in developing and implementing their own Big Local Plans.

The activities and initiatives Big Local areas have chosen to take forward have included everything from community-based training and employment schemes to tackling anti-social behaviour; building affordable homes; creating new community facilities, parks and sports centres; tackling local health and environmental issues; addressing community cohesion; and providing more activities for young people. Most importantly, through their initiatives Big Local areas have also built the skills, partnerships and confidence needed to equip their communities for the future.

Five years into the programme, Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to reflect on what has been achieved by Big Local in a series of essays to be published during 2017 and 2018. David Boyle's essay tells the story of four Big Local areas through the lived experiences of incredible people making a tangible difference to their communities. It highlights the potential released by the Big Local approach and the real challenges faced by local communities as they seek to adapt and respond to tougher circumstances and rapidly changing times.

Matt Leach
Chief executive
Local Trust


Douwe Egberts

CHAPTER ONE

# Coming at it sideways

IT WAS AFTER LYING IN BED with cyclothymic disorder, a form of mood swings, for nearly three years, that Kathryn Andrews – now the Big Local administrator in Revoe in Blackpool – took the courageous decision to stop making excuses for herself and to do whatever was necessary to get well.

It wasn't that she had no good excuses – quite the reverse: she had been diagnosed with a form of bipolar disorder, and the depression and exhaustion were completely prostrating. But it was tough for her husband and three children, and it wasn't really any way to live.

"I realised that I had lived my life backwards, had kids first, and had the feeling I was just a drain on society," she says now.

The actual trigger for her recovery came in a moment of bloody-mindedness during a medical assessment for benefits, when ATOS told her she wasn't going to be fit for work for a number of years.

"I'm a very deviant, defiant person," says Kathryn. "I said, that's not going to happen, and I made this conscious decision to change and to get better."

It wasn't easy. Sometimes she just wept. But she managed to carry on, starting with very simple things, like agreeing

with herself to take the washing out and take it in again, even on the worst days. “Just being up when the kids came home from school felt like I was doing something and not letting the whole illness absorb me,” she says.

Kathryn had moved to Revoe with her family when their landlord failed to keep up his mortgage payments. When the house was repossessed, her family was evicted. Her path to the Big Local project was by way of a functional skills course at the local college, which she took in order to practise using her brain again.

“It was good to be around people again,” she says about the course. “But some days, I’d just go home and get straight back into bed because it was so exhausting.”

Next, she decided to do her GCSEs again. She did maths, English, sociology and general studies. She became the class rep, enjoyed it, and grew in confidence in spite of the emotional roller-coaster she was going through at the same time. She signed up to do a degree in events management, and that took her into volunteering.

She started small, helping out at the annual air show, assisting with the weekend proms. It was step by step. There were many times when she wanted to “give up and sit at home crying my eyes out”. Fate also had a habit of throwing things at her to test her resolve.

In 2016, she lost her best friend, her uncle and both her parents. Her husband left her too (he has since come back). It was a desperate period. “In December 2015, I was invited to do an intensive course of counselling for six weeks. I had tried counselling a number of times over the last decade but it was never the right time for me. I wasn’t ready to face or unlock all the history and emotions that came with it. I woke that morning and decided I had every excuse in the book to not

attend, but part of getting well was making a commitment to myself that I would try. As the counselling was in December, we had a few sessions before the Christmas break, and my counsellor asked if I would like to miss a session over Christmas and resume in the new year. I refused because I knew if I missed one session and didn't go once, I wouldn't go again."

She began volunteering at the office where they manage Big Local in Revoe – Revoelution – which, like the other 149 Big Local projects around England, is funnelling £1 million over a decade into a seriously disadvantaged area. And that is where she works part-time now.

So what does Kathryn's slow, exhausting recovery have to do with the Revoelution project or the national Big Local programme? After all, it happened before she had begun volunteering there. The answer is that she is an extreme example of a theme that runs through the Big Local story, and especially perhaps in Blackpool – that involvement can change lives.

This is a paradoxical claim in a way, because Big Local is designed to hand over sizeable pots of money for local people to spend on the projects they believe will change the lives of those who live in the neighbourhood. We will come back to that purpose later. But Kathryn is an example of how this process works in unexpectedly roundabout ways – what the economist John Kay calls 'obliquity' (based on thinking by John Stuart Mill, the 19th century philosopher and political economist). Her life has been changed obliquely, not by what Revoelution has done for her, but what she has done for Revoelution. It didn't happen directly, but by getting involved in the process of making things happen.

Once she came across Revoelution, she began coming into the office every day as a volunteer, and quickly decided that "being at university doing events management wasn't for me". Being involved gave her security, flexibility and continuity as well as experience in a range of different roles. She enrolled in Local Trust training courses too. And Revoelution, aware of its potential to change lives, also employed a life coach.

"After I first came in, I haven't been away since," says Kathryn. "I'd never done any community work before. The third sector I knew very, very little about, other than the big charities with managing directors who get very big salaries. But I soon learned about partnerships and different roles and responsibilities, and it gave me an insight into how charities work. It fed my need for wanting to know more, and wanting to be more. I wanted to be more educated and wanted to get on more with my life."

It was still difficult for Kathryn. If she was going to survive economically she would need to get trained. But she never used public transport, so travelling to the courses was particularly frightening. The Revoelution chair, Susan Howarth, used to go with Kathryn so she would avoid getting too anxious, and to make sure she felt able to attend.

One area she became interested in was sociology, and that led her to think about how she might sum up the area through statistics. "I got quite interested in people as well," she says. "Quirky people make the world a colourful place."

On that basis, you might say that Revoe has more than its fair share of colour, but Kathryn wanted more. She became the communications officer on a voluntary basis. She impressed her colleagues. Then the office administrator's job came up. Unfortunately, the interviews coincided with her mother's death.

"They let me arrange a day when I'd come back from Bolton [where her mother lived], even though I felt like utter shit," she says, and with some pride. "It was another excuse I could have used for not doing it, but I thought there was always going to be things to get me out of doing things. So if I could drag myself back to Blackpool on one of my worst days, then that shows some resilience."

She got the job and now works sixteen paid hours a week, which, as for so many people in her situation, is the most hours you can work without losing benefits. She is hoping to study for an NVQ in administration. And she has used her interest in sociology to write up a background report on the Revoe neighbourhood that she continues to work on in her spare time.

What Kathryn found highlights the nature of the task ahead for her and the team. Revoe is tiny: inside its fluctuating boundaries only 3,000 people live in a handful of streets built from the 1860s onwards. Of those, as Kathryn found, about ten per cent describe themselves as being in poor health.

The community centre warden's house, which the Revoelution team uses, is next to an estate that now houses a mix of older people in sheltered accommodation plus recovering addicts – not always a happy combination. It is built on the site where the donkeys were kept that gave children the traditional rides on Blackpool beach.

Right down the middle is Central Drive, once one of Blackpool's favourite shopping locations, now partly boarded up and suffering from the same combination of poor workmanship and lack of care as the old terraced housing – crumbling facades in need of a lick of paint. Central Drive remains blighted by the slow decisions about the site of what would have been New Labour's super-casino, and by the ugliest police station in the known universe.

Despite Blackpool's diversity and energy, and the fresh breeze from the Irish Sea, it is not thriving. There is real poverty here. I stood behind a lady in the supermarket queue paying in 5p pieces for her weekly shop.

"Central Drive was the place to be," says Revoelution board member Lorraine Schofield. "There were a lot of really good shops, Clarks, big restaurants – it was really gorgeous. I suppose it was so good, we took it all for granted. It wasn't kept to a good standard, and it looks dirty and grubby."

That may be one reason why the Revoelution has been slow starting here, because it is hard for a small neighbourhood, blighted in this way, to generate the ideas and the cohesion to act decisively. There were inevitable divisions of opinion to begin with, which have left a legacy. It would seem that, if you bring a promise of a million pounds to a disadvantaged area, it can unleash some of the less useful emotions until everyone has calmed down a bit.

It is only then, when expectations have settled down, that people can begin to benefit in the way that Kathryn has done, obliquely. And when you begin to look around at the Revoelution project, you realise she isn't the only one to have had their life turned around in this way.

"To me, it's obviously made an amazing difference, eighteen months since we started spending," she says. "I can see it making a difference to so many individuals who are part of the partnership, who started out very tentative and now come in smiling. There are more people who feel comfortable enough to say hello in the street."

This is important. Ever since the radical architect Brian Anson mapped the dwindling number of relationships in former working-class Covent Garden in the late 1970s, the number of social interactions has been seen as an indicator of successful development.

If you feel isolated – especially in a place like Revoe, where there is a huge churn in the local population – you are likely to find it more difficult to cope, to get work and to escape physical and mental ill-health.

This is not just true of young people, but Revoe Big Local may have invested more in youth than in almost all other groups so far. This has taken the shape of a successful youth outreach scheme, which builds relationships with them on the street.

The youth scheme has been running a couple of nights a week. There is a new café round the corner and there are art classes for children. There is a lot going on, and it is bursting out of the old warden's flat, where insurance stipulates a maximum of fourteen people indoors at a time. It is a great deal about building confidence, not just for the receivers but also for the givers on the team.

This is a theme of the Revoe project – both an explicit one, because of the outreach schemes for young people and others, and the life coaching they offer, and an implicit one. You can feel it in the people you talk to, and Kathryn spells it out.

"When you've been to the depths of despair and struggled with self-harm – once you know what those feelings are like, then you know how easy it is to make people's lives a bit easier – even if it's just a kind word or encouragement," she says. "It's the little things that build people up. When you've got such low self-esteem and feel completely worthless, when other people can see good things in you it can take your breath away."

There is evidence all round the Revoe project that this is true. Some small gestures feel like a drop in the ocean, and the bare terraced streets may not have been transformed by the pots of flowers the project has made available, but they certainly make people feel better. One of the big pots has been stolen, which is certainly evidence of something or other.

Take for example, three of the Revoelution team, Bonnie, Brian and Lorraine.

Bonnie runs a gardening club, having run pubs and been a motorcycle courier. “It gets me out of the house. It makes a big difference to me,” she says.

Brian is the paid caretaker who spends his time maintaining the Revoelution ‘hub’. He is especially keen on plans for guerrilla gardening on abandoned plots of land. “I used to keep myself to myself,” he says. “Now I’m more involved, I know a lot more people, which I didn’t do before. I think it’s making a difference.”

Lorraine runs the children’s art club on Wednesday afternoons and the adult chat drop-in on Fridays. “I thought it was about time we stepped up to look after the place and provide something, so that adults could pass on their knowledge to the children,” she says. “So I thought, let’s see what I can do.”

Lorraine moved to Revoe forty years ago. She had a tough time at school because nobody recognised her dyslexia. But she struggled on, found she could draw, worked as a hairdresser, made woolly jumpers, then number plates as a supervisor. She had a daughter, ran a toddlers’ group at the local church and then became a dinner lady at Revoe School. But she got flu so badly that she couldn’t go back to work.

“I had to fight my way through,” she says, “and being on this partnership has been good too. When Susan [the chair] took it on, I began coming again and I found I had a voice. They make allowances for my dyslexia – they print things on peach paper for me so I can read it better. I am listened to as well and my opinions have value here – it is one big happy family really. If I walk by people, they know me. There’s a lot going on.”

These are all testimonies to the paradoxical nature of change. They are what happens when you ask people who are

usually the recipients of support to do the supporting. People who are usually 'volunteered to' can find that the prospect of a useful, valued role is transformative, even for their physical health – at least that's what the research literature says. Big Local may not have been designed as an experiment to test these propositions, but it looks like it is doing just that.

But it does depend on there being people at the heart of the operation who understand this very personal and paradoxical element of change. And, in this case, there are.

Presiding over the effort is Susan Howarth, who runs a local community church and has been one of Kathryn's mentors in her recovery. She chairs the Revoelution partnership – the group of residents leading Big Local in their area and deciding how to spend the money.

Susan is an extraordinary individual, one of those people whose life has also been profoundly changed – not, in this case, by Big Local – but in parallel ways to those of Kathryn, Lorraine and the others.

She began her career as a biochemist, moved into the fitness business and then slipped into prostitution to pay for her children to attend a private school. She set up some of the brothels on Central Drive, got involved in drugs and was then brought up short by what can only be described as a road-to-Damascus experience.

"Literally, it was like God just slapped me around the face and I changed overnight," she told me. "That was how I ended up with the church and living here. People thought I'd lost the plot."

So, in 2004, she sold her six-bedroom home and started the New Life church and has been active in the community ever since, helping people without judging them and – where

possible – healing them. Like so many other Big Local chairs, she found herself taking on the role by accident.

She started going to meetings of the Big Local partnership, and found herself voted on to the committee. There was nobody to chair the meetings. “I said I’d hold the fort until somebody suitable comes along,” she says, “and I’m still holding the fort eighteen months later.”

She says the biggest problem has been around community engagement – how to do it, who should be included, what role professionals should play – and Revoe is one area where Big Local was beset by tensions in the early days, which is one reason why the team remains squeezed into the community centre warden’s flat.

“The first problem was distrust, because they thought the council would just spend the money,” says Susan. “That’s just natural. Then there was the problem of reaching out to people. I think they should have invested some money and people just to get everybody on at the start. We’re still trying to do that all these years later.”

But the way Big Local has got chairs together to help solve each other’s problems, and managed to generate a degree of mutual support, has been a godsend, she says. “It has been fantastic, a wonderful help to me, to meet people in the same position as me, and I wish it had happened earlier. I would love to see someone with more of a background in community development, or who has skills to work with the council, to bring funds in, to take my place.”

The problem, says Susan, is that in a small, impoverished neighbourhood, it can be difficult to find people able and willing to take on that kind of role. That is, after all, exactly why they were chosen for Big Local in the first place.

It becomes increasingly clear that the early years of Revoe Big Local were a little traumatic. In practice, in an area of serious disadvantage, it can be extremely difficult to make an effective start. Existing agencies imagine that the million pounds can solve all their financial problems, if they can just persuade local people what is 'good' for them. But people emerge with parallel agendas, longstanding ambitions and existing dysfunctional relationships, all of which get in the way.

Some Big Local areas try to tackle this problem by employing a project manager, as Susan suggests. Revoelution's manager is Andrew Walker, who arrived in post in 2016. He already knew the neighbourhood and described the task to start with as "a bit of refereeing". The local partnership of residents had managed to get as far as getting a plan onto paper, and they needed a project manager to help turn the plan into reality.

"It had got a bit tasty here," he says now. "They were all good-hearted people coming at things from different ways, and personalities sparking off each other." Nobody wanted to talk about the nature of the divisions, but the clues were also everywhere for anyone who really wanted to know. "I was a new face and neutral. Everyone seemed very nice, nobody was horrible, but it was a real thing."

Partly as a result of this, the Revoelution team is still squeezed into the warden's flat next to the community centre they have no relationship with. This is difficult for meetings, let alone for some of the children's art events. But if it kick-starts the process of finding bigger, long-term community accommodation, that might be all to the good. A permanent base will require major investment, and it certainly isn't one of those 'small things'.

The challenge of the relationship with the wider community is in some ways even more difficult – because,

without fruitful relationships with key local players, it is going to be difficult to make things happen as they should. And again, the lure of a million pounds can get in the way.

"The problem is that lots of people don't know what the heck we are doing," says Andrew. "They think we have yachts moored somewhere. There is also a fair chunk of people who have never heard of us, though the team is working hard to change this. There are peculiar perceptions in the community and it is a little bit frustrating that our plan was at key points relying on third party, council or council-run activities."

They built a relationship with a substance-misuse organisation, hoping to employ them, but because of a restructuring, the organisation backed out as it was the wrong time for them to be more involved.

They asked the council to help with a key ambition in the plan – to have a security camera on a major walkway in the local estate. They paid for it and the council installed it. The Revoe team thought it was turned on when it wasn't. It took months before it became operational.

Revoe wanted to put up some lights in trees as part of improving the area. The council agreed and noted there was a suitable power source already in place, and yet, a year later, it still hasn't happened.

They have been working with the council's business development department. It can be a slow process because council services have been slashed and officers are trying to cover multiple roles.

"It was like waiting for the cows to come home," says Andrew. "In the end, we had to set aside worries about who would sue who if we put a hanging basket up and it fell down, or what the insurance position was. We needed to use our common sense and find solutions."

This is a potentially important lesson that so many Big Local areas have had to learn, sometimes the hard way – that you need quick wins, and they will probably need to be achievements that don't rely too much on the public sector.

"We've got councillors on board now and they are enthusiastic," says Andrew. "It feels like it's like an oil tanker – taking a while to get up speed, but once it's going, that's it. But it can be a hard job starting the damn thing."

The problem with driving an oil tanker is that you need somebody on the bridge using the navigation charts, and this is what Andrew and his team are doing. As with so many similar Big Local projects, they are focused with excitement and nervousness on the 'exit' – how to leave a sustainable legacy at the end of the project. However many of those life-affirming little things that make so much difference to people's lives have been achieved, they won't have solved everything.

A third of the primary school students changed over last year. There have been huge influxes of Poles and Romanians in recent years. The worry is that, even if the Revoe Big Local partnership sets up the existing population, in a few years' time there will be a whole new population starting out again.

The life coaching has had a major impact on those involved. The youth workers are engaged, though it is not clear that this can go on forever now that the council has abolished its youth service. Their community-chest, grant-giving programme is up and running.

The Revoelution programme is an ambitious one by any standards. It is even more ambitious when you think that the purpose is to find a solution that lasts. And sustainability can be an unnerving business – the need to make a permanent difference when there is nobody to tell you how, and not even academic theories to support you, can hold some places back.

It can be the cause of deer-in-the-headlights unwillingness to act at all. Those in charge sometimes have to play down the ambition a bit.

"It is hard to say whether we will have done anything about poverty at the end," says Susan the Revoelution chair. "But even if draws the community together it would be a positive result. If it could get rid of some of the prejudice. We have improved some lives, and it has been about building people up, about bridge building with groups, and we've learned a lot in the first plan – it is about constantly learning. But we don't want it just to be about hanging baskets. Hopefully this is a stepping stone."

What makes Big Local exciting is also what can limit it in a place like Revoe. There are no targets, no instructions and no theory – just the money, as long as you can form an inclusive partnership to hammer together an agreed plan. That makes it a unique and exciting experiment, perhaps the most important experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK. But in the poorest, most neglected or most battered places, the absence of a theory can get in the way.

"What I want to see for the people in this area is hope for a better future," says Susan. "I run a soup kitchen and people often don't see any possibility of change in their lives. It is hard for them to change. Some of them have given up at thirty."

This is the story so far – and behind the discussion lies the fear that progress will have to be abandoned again, as well as nervousness about how to make change permanent. The trouble is, of course, that – compared to the weight of need – a million pounds hardly goes very far.

Yet there is, not so much a theory as a belief that, given the resources, the community will spontaneously 'come together' and rise to the challenge. Coming to Revoe, you

realise that, actually, they can and they do – but that isn't quite the end of the story.

For me, the tale I wanted to tell here was different. It was that real, sustainable change seemed to be taking place everywhere, but as a side-effect of the money – the strange alchemy of what happens when people who have struggled for years with their own issues find that people are depending on them, need them and value them.

Change, and whether it is possible, is one of the great issues of our age, and it is pretty obvious to everyone, apart from the Department of Work and Pensions, that it doesn't usually come from telling them to get on with it. It doesn't come from confronting them with implacable authority. Even in Kathryn's case, when she refused to accept a life as a dependent, it was exhausting and difficult and required a great deal of personal support. But it wasn't just about the support – she needed to take the decision, make the commitment and find a role.

There are clues here as to how to make personal change happen much more widely, and some explanation as to why it remains so difficult. That is partly because it is a sideways movement – the money comes in, it makes things happen, but it's the people involved in the helping for whom the change has been most profound.

What I found in Revoe was a microcosm of the nation as a whole: incredibly diverse, rather rundown and uncared for, filled with people with a range of competences and some fascinating stories of struggle, hardship and survival.

It is bleak and hopeful at the same time, and there is no doubt that Big Local is having an impact on people's lives there. Whether it has enough of an impact to last is not yet clear, but it carries with it a powerful whiff of hope.

CHAPTER TWO

# Small changes matter

IT WAS AN IMPORTANT MOMENT in St Matthew's, a 4,200-strong mixed ethnic neighbourhood in the heart of Leicester. Four coaches were drawn up outside Taylor Road Primary School at eight in the morning, and they were going to take families to the seaside in Skegness, two hours away by road.

"It's like a school trip," said one of the children, "but we're taking our parents with us."

It sounds like an everyday outing of the kind communities have done since excursions were invented a century or more ago, when a Leicester lad, Thomas Cook, organised the first day trip. What made this one significant was that families here tend not to go out together, ever.

That may not seem much, but imagine you have been stuck inside the house with anything up to seven children, from summer to winter, year after year. That is one of the issues identified by residents in the Big Local area of St Matthew's in Leicester. It is clearly a social problem that especially affects women – their menfolk go out to work, their children go to school, but they stay at home, nervous of the world outside and of other cultures, dependent and often unhappy, certainly unfulfilled. Of course, this isn't a problem

that affects everyone, but it is one that is perceived locally And in that respect, the Skegness trip, organised by the Big Local project there, was a big deal.

"Everyone began talking to each other," says Sayed Khadri, one of the trip organisers and vice-chair of St Matthew's Big Local. "Once people sat down, they found sometimes that they had been living next door for two years and had never come across each other. When we arrived in Skegness, they mixed in even more."

Sayed found the same thing himself. He ran into a friend of his from fifteen years before. Each had no idea the other was living on the estate. "I said: 'What are you doing here...?'"

There have been huge changes in the area over the past two decades. It has gone from being a dangerous corner of Leicester twenty years ago to the neighbourhood with the lowest crime rates; from a white and predominantly Afro-Caribbean community to a predominantly Asian and Somali one; from an ageing population to one where nearly half the residents are under 24 (and a fifth of them are under five). But it has never stopped being poor. It remains the neighbourhood in the East Midlands with the lowest average income.

But the main problem, according to those people who came together to draw up a Big Local plan, was this isolation. In this respect, at least, it was the complete opposite of the Revoe neighbourhood of Blackpool.

"People here tend to stay indoors. They don't tend to mix with other backgrounds," says Sayed. "If they don't go out to mix in, they won't know about what life in the UK has to offer. Not many families go out – not even taking their children to the town centre to have an ice cream. The majority of families tend to stay indoors."

Sayed's work as a football referee takes him outside St Matthew's. "I get to see different cultures and different communities," he says. "I see life outside the estate and how other people live their lives. I'm really here in the Big Local team to promote sports because it can get people out."

Having a million pounds, as these Big Local areas do, can weigh heavily on your conscience – as if it was a great gift that must not be wasted (which indeed it is). But, paradoxically – and this is certainly true in St Matthew's – the most successful investment, the one that seems to make the biggest difference, can be the simplest and smallest.

That can't be a general rule – otherwise, why the million pounds? Why worry about scale and impact? But it is important, and perhaps especially here in St Matthew's, where there is some consensus that their small investment in the Skegness trip, Sayed's idea, is the one that made the biggest difference.

It is fascinating that a community that stays resolutely behind closed doors, a little nervous of other cultures, should find a way out through something as traditionally English as a coach trip to the seaside. Yet it has.

Sayed has lived in the area since he was a child. He started attending meetings of the Big Local partnership and realised that it had huge potential to get people out a bit, and that he could use it to promote sport. "Whatever we do, I keep adding a sporting touch to it," he says. "So when we had the Big Local hub opening ceremony, there were all different cultures making different types of food and mixed teams playing all different sports. Everyone got together."

The little things – the effect of an afternoon on the beach, or just making sure the litter is collected (St Matthew's still has a terrible litter problem) – seemed to me to be the theme

of this neighbourhood, as it wrestles with a combination of poverty and history to remake residents' lives.

Visit St Matthew's now and you find yourself on a sliver of urban land, a small island surrounded by dual carriageways, with the garage as a kind of entrance gateway. The garage is owned by another Big Local partnership member, Lee Nicholls – and by his father before him – and it stands like a lighthouse to welcome people in. This is an area of low-rise developments and unused children's play areas, and – partly thanks to Sayed – an enthusiasm for sports.

One of the newest additions is a suite of outdoor exercise equipment, provided by the city council because of a "Why not here?" tweet by Simon Johnson, the local community policeman and Big Local chair.

There is also investment planned which should provide a legacy for when the funded sports days and Skegness trips are a distant memory. The partnership is using a range of funding channels to build an astro-turf pitch, together with a running track – aware that these will need constant attention – and the local Premier League football club has agreed to hold regular community training sessions there.

This makes sports a kind of bedrock of the pattern that is emerging for the St Matthew's Big Local. And Sayed is planning to bring back penalty shoot-outs and three-legged races and mixed cricket, and other English memories that belong with an afternoon at the seaside.

Again, little things can make a big difference, and there is no doubt that the involvement of the local police has been crucial. Because, at least in St Matthew's, it is down to their commitment and continuity and having two familiar faces in

uniform, instantly recognisable, who appear to know everyone.

The Big Local chair, Simon, the community police officer whose burly figure has been a familiar and reassuring sight around the neighbourhood now for thirteen years, got special permission to go on the seaside trips.

"I kept popping in to the Big Local meetings and hearing the frustration that things weren't going faster," says Simon. "I suggested that they needed to form a committee, and ended up as chair."

The 'little things' strategy – or, to put it in management-speak, the 'quick wins' strategy – was something that Simon proposed to counteract the cynicism that was looming because of their slow start.

"Most areas like this one don't like the police," says Sayed. "But we love the police, because our local PCSO is chair of Big Local. People think he's got the million in his back pocket, so you can imagine that when he pulls people over because they're not wearing a seat belt, they say 'OK, sir!'"

Whether because of the community police, or the changing population, or Big Local, Sayed confirms that the neighbourhood has changed: "Twenty-five years ago here at night, you would be mugged or someone would ask you for money. Now it's quite safe. It has changed a lot."

A second vice-chair is Sumaya Bihi, an entrepreneurial health student at the University of Wolverhampton. Born in Holland but Somali in origin, she has become a familiar figure in her robes.

Sumaya came to St Matthew's with a charity called Rajo Somali (the word means 'hope') which was working with young girls and women from the local Somali community.

She enjoyed helping the Big Local people set up events celebrating diversity. Aware that there was little for young people, she wanted events for them too, such as basketball groups and other activities to prevent them getting into crime or drugs. So she put together a plan and put it to the Big Local committee.

They agreed the plan and the events went ahead in 2016. So did her play scheme, where she regularly had 30 children and ten volunteers to help her.

It wasn't easy. "There was very bad behaviour," says Sumaya, "because they hadn't seen anything like that before. I think it was that it wasn't like going to school or the mosque, and they didn't know what to do. But they got used to it."

The solution was partly playing games and icebreakers in a circle. Then Sumaya hit on the idea of doing Somali dancing, and – as things seem to do for her – events developed. They practised. They performed in an event at Henley-on-Thames. They met the Henley mayor.

As it turned out, Sumaya had a family connection with Henley – her great-grandfather had been based there during the Second World War, when he was with the Free French. The Henley town hall responded and the dancers were celebrated there too.

Then there was the Parks Day festival – Big Local's response to summer, and a deliberate attempt to get people to make traditional food and share it across language and cultural barriers. It was then that Sumaya made a speech and told everyone they were going to set up a group for Somali women.

She noticed it was particularly daunting for women for whom English was not their first language. She wondered if they would like their own group, sharing food and making the first steps towards integrating, but at their own speed and in their own language.

So began the Somali Women's Café – not so much a café as a coffee morning. Sumaya designed posters, and a policewoman came along to help. Ten women came to the first meeting.

"It turned out really great," she says. "We were talking about things going on at home, when people were stuck at home and couldn't really talk about it. We get between five and fifteen people, depending on the week. We also did sessions on health and beauty and they wanted more of it."

Weeks went by, then they stopped the café while they thought about how to carry it on sustainably. It now has a life of its own, meeting at the St Matthew's House on a Wednesday, while Sumaya has moved on to other projects.

She has her own business selling hijab scarves and has grown it fast on social media. She has become interested in enterprise, and wants to involve young people and find ways of helping them set up their own businesses too.

"I want to grow old with Big Local, and see the positive outcomes on the community," she says. "But I also want to finish university."

We are sitting in the Big Local new office, which – as so often – is in a disused pub, in this case beside the park that is the central attraction of the St Matthew's estate. The huge pub piano is still in place, and there are painters and decorators in. There is the smell of new paint, which always makes for a sense of anticipation.

The pub is owned, rather unusually – but then it had been shut for years – by the Church of England diocese, which is letting it to St Matthew's Big Local for eight years at a peppercorn rent. It has a small group of Franciscan nuns living

above it and a space for regular services in the basement. It will be a brilliant resource.

I bring up the delicate question of long-term impact, and at least one person in the room agrees that there has already been a noticeable change.

"We are definitely having a long-term effect," he says. "You can see it in the reduction in social isolation and improved self-esteem."

It is also early days yet. There is still a great deal of litter, though it seems churlish to emphasise this, given that this is an increasingly effective place. But we need to be a little more challenging here. The truth is that, apart from the imminent arrival of the new all-weather pitch and the professional football-club trainers, one of the reasons for the emphasis on the little things is that the big things have proved a bit more intractable.

There were plans to provide non-interest loans to local businesses, as the big banks had withdrawn. Revolving loan funds, which support local business to expand, sound in theory like exactly the right way forward – but, despite its huge importance, ultra-local economic development is remarkably little practised or researched, and actually, we don't know when it works and when it fails. In this case, in St Matthew's, it was tougher than expected. There were hundreds of businesses but they were mainly sole traders, and only a handful were geared up for loans, let alone interest-free ones.

The idea of providing enterprise training to these businesses was also tough, given that so many of them were registered in the area (150 or so tucked under stairwells or hidden away in flats). The difficulty was that the take-up from businesses was very low and that, once they had actually mapped the businesses on the estate, they turned out – with a

handful of exceptions, like Lee's garage – to be mainly messy, hand-to-mouth affairs, just clinging on. They were highly unlikely to expand and did not really welcome help or advice.

On the other hand, the free training offered by the local college through bursaries to the people of St Matthew's has had an enormous response. About a hundred local people, mainly women, have now been through the training.

The new headquarters is also a clue to the difficulties that all Big Local areas must face at this stage of the history of local government. The building was home to a highly successful youth charity called the Contact Project, which ran out of funding last year. It would be tragic if St Matthew's were to be hit by the curse of grant philanthropy – such an obsession with innovation that even the most successful projects must eventually close, to be reinvented or die.

The Contact Project was a youth scheme and had employed a core team of youth workers over the previous fifteen years. There was some hope that the Big Local funding could fill the gap and keep the Contact Project going, but the reality was that it would have required the entire million pounds to do so.

"There is an irony about this," says Big Local rep Tim Morton. "There is a funding gap, and we are now losing projects, organisations and staff left, right and centre. Big Local was supposed to be the cherry on the cake; now it is the cake. It's very challenging."

Tim arrived in 2012, in the very earliest stages of the project, as one of the Big Local reps provided by Local Trust to support residents. He discovered what are becoming very familiar teething troubles.

"Everyone assumed I had a million pounds in my back pocket. Everyone wanted to meet me. There was a lot of

coffee and cake. There were interesting tensions which came out of the process – I should be careful how I say this…"

Like so many other impoverished estates, St Matthew's has been the object of regeneration before. It has seen money pour in and out. There is some scepticism about the Big Local process, and not surprisingly. It has taken some time for local people to discover that the usual rules of official regeneration don't apply.

"It has gone very well," says Tim. "We are getting to an interesting position where the people who have been involved at the start are still here. The mixture of the whole partnership is pretty broad, though that's not always the people who actually turn up."

Simon's involvement also helps. "We have high awareness of what we are doing here, because we've got a chair in uniform who walks the estate every day when he's working here," says Tim. "He also builds the website, does the media, and keeps Twitter and Facebook and the database up to date too. Actually, the best things that have happened don't cost very much."

Here we are again. The little things, like the Skegness trips. Tim described how, on another trip, people pushed the tables and chairs together so they could eat with each other. He remembers Simon being thanked and told that it was "the best ever thing they had done".

And perhaps, anyway, it isn't scale that makes the difference. They made two loans to businesses and they are being repaid. The local credit union, Clockwise, is now an active partner building a service on the estate.

The ten new litter bins have been sited in places where the council would not have put them if there had been no St Matthew's Big Local, which has begun to make some difference to the litter problem.

Tim also takes issue with the idea that the purpose of Big Local is to spend as fast as possible. "We don't have to spend a million pounds," he says, "we have to use a million."

The hope is that there will be some kind of development of Gandhi's famous maxim that teaching someone to fish is more effective than giving someone a fish. People should be able to know, after this, how to fish in the great pool of philanthropic and statutory funding, and do so for themselves. Fishing involves bait, and the million can act as powerful bait to attract other funding. The MUGA (multi-use games area) now has serious buy-in: £50,000 from the Cruyff Foundation; £45,000 from a local charity, Samworth's Sports Opportunity Fund; and a bid to Sport England for a further £100,000. Nor does it have to be money they are given, says Lee.

"The more I'm involved," he says, "the more I can see there are ways of generating money."

Maybe that is the sustainable change that might be the best outcome at the end of ten years. Not just a stable community – it may be too stable in some ways – but a neighbourhood with the know-how and skills they need to earn what they need.

In the process, you might also see the same phenomenon that I saw in Blackpool – that it is the people pulling the levers who find themselves changed the most.

"It has improved me, I think," says Lee. "I've developed more skills, like listening to people, seeing other people's views on things. It has made me a better person."

But there is a difficult question we have to ask. If it is the little things that make a difference, then what is their relationship to the big things? Does one lead to the other? Or is it a process of what economists call 'agglomeration' – that little things plus little things plus little things make big change?

Does that then mean we can safely ignore the big things altogether – government policies or programmes? Because we have to understand that the vast bulk of central government resources take no interest whatever in these 'little things', perhaps because they have no means to deliver them effectively.

Big Local is not a means by which government can ignore its duties to provide security and support to its people. But it does let people find that, by working together, they can make a difference, and it helps individuals realise they are not alone. They all know a man or a woman who knows how to do something, and if they don't, they know a man or a woman who knows a man or a woman – six degrees of separation.

CHAPTER THREE

# The politics of getting things done

WHERE THE A2 WHIZZES INTO Chatham in Kent, there is a huge, three-arch, red brick structure that carries the high-speed Javelin trains into London St Pancras International. Built in 1865, and home to squadrons of pigeons, it gives its name to Big Local in Chatham.

Arches Local has now been running since 2012, and the arches themselves have become symbolic – both of the kind of struggle that any disadvantaged area has to go through to drag itself back to life, and of the lazy disdain with which it is treated by public and private sectors alike.

Things are much improved after long wrestling bouts with the council and Network Rail, but not yet right by any means. Arches Local took on the owner of one side of the bridge – JCDecaux, the biggest outdoor advertiser in the UK – and finally persuaded its operations director to meet them. Residents prepared for the meeting, only to find that the company wriggled out again by putting the sliver of land up for sale.

Next, Arches Local persuaded Network Rail to carry out repairs and clean up the layers of pigeon poo under the bridge, but found that contractors had left the old rusty pipes in place, still pouring water onto the walkway below (and had

put screws into the new pipes, which meant they leaked). Network Rail did clean hundreds of dead pigeons out of the net, but the net was so poorly repaired that pigeons flew back in.

And when Arches finally persuaded the council to clean the patch of green in the middle of the site, officials decided it was necessary to close the A2 to do it, and intimated that Arches Local would have to pay for future work.

Yet the Arches Local co-ordinator, Stephen Perez, stays resolutely good-humoured and friendly and remains on good terms (he says) with Network Rail and local councillors and officials alike. He is, in short, a class act – a constant presence, calm and determined, walking endlessly backwards and forwards down the narrow strip of the Arches area, from a rundown park at one end to a reviving one at the other.

It is what comes, he says, of not driving.

The story of the arches also illustrates Stephen's example of the great paradox of change: all you need to do to change is to stay exactly the same for long enough and time will do the rest.

And there, in a nutshell, is the main problem his neighbourhood faces. It isn't so much that anything has really gone wrong with this white working-class area on one side of the valley that runs through Chatham. It is that it has failed to wake up enough to protect itself from the changes happening everywhere else. It has been too sluggish to support the endless injections of regeneration investment, which just become yet more overgrown white elephants to go alongside all the others. It isn't that the Arches hasn't changed at all; it has failed to change enough.

Take for example the Luton Millennium Green at one end of the area, funded just sixteen years ago but allowed to become overgrown with weeds and scrub, until it was taken over by drug dealers and covered with broken glass. It was

said to be the only park in the area that council employees were forbidden to visit alone.

To walk Stephen's beat with him is to see the huge effort of will that is required, by him and his colleagues and their neighbours, to drag the Arches into life again – cajoling and insisting and bringing in the kind of outside professional support that other areas take for granted. It is also to see just how impressive the progress is that has been made so far.

Below the arches themselves is a Persian rug shop with a talking parrot. Proprietor Harry has been there for four years. Thanks to Medway Council, the layers of pigeon droppings have been cleared away by high-pressure hoses on his side of the road, but they still look deep on the other. It is hardly surprising that local doctors report high levels of respiratory problems here.

The Millennium Green, thanks to the efforts of Stephen and the community, is now restored, though the council contractor is still refusing to cut the grass in the pocket-park area.

It is also beautiful, a green lung in a concrete neighbourhood. It is a place that can restore your faith in life and catapult you out of bed in the mornings. Today, Stephen collects up the litter and deposits it in the bin – it is hard not to copy him – as he shows me around.

The re-creation of the park has been carried out with a healthy and necessary disregard for regulations. They ignored the rules about needing gates on the children's area because it seemed to give a false sense of security about dogs. They refused to put up notices thanking their various funders in case it prevented that vital sense of local ownership.

And fostering that sense of ownership is part of the battle. When the new plantings happened, there was a call to say that vandals had uprooted the trees and broken the new fence. Stephen hurried over and, to his surprise, found

nothing out of place. It transpired that the neighbours had already replanted the trees and mended the fence.

The famous 'broken windows' theory, of which more later, suggesting that tackling small elements of disorder deters bigger ones – appeared to be working. The trees have since stayed in the ground and the drug dealers have largely decamped to somewhere more disordered and abandoned.

Small elements of disorder are not actually that difficult to find in this part of Chatham. The main road, which forms a border to the town centre, includes a new theatre in the former town hall on one corner, followed by two abandoned buildings, a pub that closed down recently after a stabbing and an office of the Department for Work and Pensions. There are abandoned shopping trolleys – a ubiquitous symbol of decay – and enough broken windows for any number of academic theories. If you live further up the hill that overlooks the arches your life expectancy increases by five to seven years.

There is real poverty too. As we walk through the first park, we come across an old man looking dazed on the bench and Stephen asks if he is OK.

"I just need something to eat," he says.

There is also an absolute profusion of litter. So many beer cans had been thrown over Network Rail's fences by the arches that they had reached the top and begun to overflow (they have now been cleared out, but replacements are already piling up). There was so much broken glass – maybe twelve years' worth – on the brick stage at the Millennium Green that they needed an event to clear it all away.

It is too easy to blame the people who live in the Arches for this. It transpired that the street-cleaning contractor had abandoned the area too. Stephen had to find photographic evidence that they were not bothering to pick up local litter

or clean local streets, and has had to persuade and cajole the council into overseeing the street-cleaning contract properly.

What makes meeting Stephen so fascinating is that, despite these battles, he has managed to stay on good terms with local officials, who trust him. There have been no furious confrontations, no angry stand-offs – though there were spectacular rages from council officials when they discovered they would not control the million pounds. Stephen describes how one senior official slammed his file down on the table and stormed out of the room. He no longer works for Medway Council.

"I believe in being nice to people," says Stephen now. "That's what I tell my grassroots football teams. If you're not nice to the other side, they can be more determined to beat you."

In fact, Stephen is a fascinating case-study of someone who, through willpower, perseverance, trust and good humour, has managed to kick-start a process of local change. It is the unexpected story of someone who found his vocation accidentally, and it goes to the heart of this grammar of change.

There are strange parallels between two Big Local administrators – Kathryn in Blackpool and Stephen in Chatham. Their background and experience are completely different, but they have one thing in common: both were motivated by a pig-headed unwillingness to be categorised by state officials in ways that limited them. Both refused to accept the judgement of social workers or doctors that, they feared, would give them an excuse to do nothing.

For Kathryn, it was social services who told her she would not work for years. For Stephen, it was a doctor who told him he was dangerously ill with high blood-pressure and diabetes.

He had three children, he and his wife were spending a great

deal of money on childcare, and he felt he had too little time for the children. His health was bad and he was very overweight.

The moment of crisis came after a visit to Ireland when he found he was having to visit the toilet all the time and had a catastrophic collapse in energy. He had not visited the doctor for seventeen years.

"I could have tanked it and refused to change, just taken tablets for diabetes and blood pressure," he says now. "The diabetic nurse said I would never play football again. I wasn't even playing it. I said, I don't agree with you that I need to take all these tablets. I'm going to go away and sort myself out."

He did not return for eighteen months. He ate healthily, took up running and got involved in his children's football. When he went back, tests showed that he was no longer diabetic and his blood pressure was fine.

Stephen had been brought up in Dartford, up the road towards London. He moved to the Arches area because it had a similar atmosphere. He was not enjoying his job in IT outsourcing. He gave it up to care for his young children and got involved in neighbourhood regeneration.

"The old work really meant nothing," he said. "I was making money for people who didn't need it, and the more money they got, the more miserable they seemed to get. I thought, actually this is what work should be like – it's local."

He had very little disposable income, just enough to pay the bills, but it was, he said, the "happiest period of my life".

"I started doing community stuff because I was bored," says Stephen. "I got involved with European-funded projects really as a way of seeing what was going on. I got fascinated about how you get money into the area."

He became interested in the fundraising game – the body

language, the buzzwords, the political tricks, and understanding the needs and fears of funders. He was infuriated by the way that good ideas were dumped because unqualified people would squash them. He worked out that it was often the people who stuck around longest, being persistent and patient, who got what they needed – if only because, by then, the funders were desperate to spend their money.

"I could see what was going on," he says. "People with great ideas were put off by people who weren't qualified to know. Because, actually, people are experts in living here. And if we can do it here, we can do it anywhere."

He was infuriated that £75,000 was just given back for one project because managers could not spend it.

"If you had taken it and thrown it up in the air, it would have been better spent than giving it back," he says.

When he first got involved with Big Local, he soon stepped away because there was no fundraising challenge – they already had the money. But the fear of giving it back nagged away at him and he came back to chair the partnership when it put together plans for 2013 and 2014.

When that was done, he moved on from the chair's role to become the Arches Local administrator. He has no car, so he walks his patch like a community policeman on the beat, at street level, knowing everyone and aware of the details that make a difference – the tree that shelters drug dealers outside the local school, the unlettable flats, the plastic litter bins waiting to be set alight.

I talk to Tammy Jayaguru, who has found a role as a manager of the Magpie Café in another disused local pub, and who has found it transformative. "I believe in myself a bit

more now," she says. "There are more possibilities in life. I love it here."

As I walk through the railway arch and onto the rundown council car park past the school, and watch as Stephen hails people by name, I can't doubt that he's making a difference personally, and moment by moment.

He also believes strongly, like Tim in Leicester, that the money has to be used, rather than always having to be spent. Just as in St Matthew's, the little things seem to count – their biggest success, the Lego club, also cost the least ("the best £500 we ever spent").

"We can use it to match more money, to see how much extra lottery money it brings in, but we don't spend it or do stuff with it that's meaningless," he says. "What Big Local does is unlock something and approach things in the right way, because just talking to the right people can achieve so much without spending a penny."

His other principle, slipped into the conversation, makes me think. It is to act. To do things and encourage other people to do things. It makes me reflect on how little our political culture encourages action. Perhaps because politicians believe in committees more than life itself, they assume that is the highest anyone can aspire to. There is so much discussion, assessment, evaluation and consultation in public life, but so very little action.

"I find that the fear of regret sometimes paralyses people from doing anything at all, because to have done nothing means you have to regret nothing," says Stephen. "We need to give people the opportunity to get things wrong – and to do something."

Part of the problem with this corner of Chatham is not that there is no money going in, says Stephen.

"There are actually millions in housing benefit going in,

but you see people there with holes in their shoes and drug addictions and myriad health issues," he says. "But the people who own the houses live comfortably in Surrey or Richmond. I'm not saying it's wrong or right, but the disparity is wrong."

Part of that disparity is the kind of dependence that means people have not been "challenging anyone here to do a proper job".

Then you remember the way the cleaning contractors used to behave towards the area – and the other big agencies responsible, for example, for the arches themselves – and you begin to see a pattern.

Doing something doesn't mean spending nothing, and Arches Local have been thinking about setting up a new kind of local lettings agency that treats their tenants a bit better, giving them better agreements and longer tenancies, perhaps in return for higher rents.

"Happy tenants are better tenants than worried tenants," says Stephen. "We're looking at that idea."

He is also aware that local people need more training and more qualifications. They also need a reason to stay in the area.

"It used to be that people's only aspiration was to leave, so that's what they did," he says. "People with ideas, efforts and gumption have left looking to find something that I believe is here already – we just need to polish it a little bit. I mean, children like living here. They know what's good, that it's close to town and near schools. They are also acutely aware of the dangers. But if you fell down outside here, people would come and see if you were alright."

The strategy is the same, to build up trust with the council, to be seen about – and in that sense Stephen has become an embodiment of Big Local. When officials see him, they know him and "it makes them feel safer about allowing

us to do stuff," he says.

He has had to step out of the local politics to make change happen, and to keep talking and acting.

"We just want change," he says. "We always say there's a lot of politics that goes on here. We're not political but we are in the politics of getting things done, and to a certain extent we'll deal with anybody. Because beggars can't be choosers. We've got to have dialogue and conversation, if we're going to make things happen. When you're doing this role, you realise people do want much the same things. There will be different ways of getting there, but everybody wants to feel happy, safe and secure."

I wonder, after meeting Stephen, whether every neighbourhood ought to have a Guardian of the Galaxy like him, with the power of a million pounds behind him, talking, patrolling and acting. Then I realise that they do – every neighbourhood has elected local councillors who are supposed to be dedicated to the needs of their local ward, just as Stephen is with the Arches.

I realise, of course, that most councillors are only paid for the meetings they attend, most of which are rigidly indoors. Perhaps part of the solution is to encourage them to get out a bit more.

CHAPTER FOUR

# An elusive theory

IN 1886, WILLIAM MORRIS – designer, writer and radical – imagined he dreamed of meeting the man who had inspired the Peasants' Revolt five centuries earlier. Morris published the fantasy as A Dream of John Ball, and it included this insight into the way that change actually works:

> "I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."

I have always felt that Morris grasped something important in his dream about the paradoxical nature of political change, which eludes most politicians. It is a sideways, crab-like, oblique process. You don't get there directly. It is hard to define and slips through the fingers. Like making friends, you can't set out to do it – you do something else, turn around and hey, you have friends! Big Local is political with a small 'p', in the sense that Stephen Perez explained in Chatham, but this obliquity applies as much here as it does anywhere else.

It means not just that change is difficult – which is one reason why our own generation is so obsessed with it – but also that there is no 'one best way', Frederick Winslow Taylor's great management fantasy. There is no magic formula, except maybe that when you win you lose, and often when you lose, you win.

The Big Local areas have tended to be places that have managed to dodge even this sliver of hope: they have usually lost both ways – by changing and by not changing. When regeneration money has cascaded down from on high, with its batteries of targets, checklists and KPIs – and New Deal for Communities had £1.7 billion over eleven years – change has been extraordinarily elusive. There were jobs and crime reductions, but sometimes, all that their efforts achieved was to raise local property prices and drive out the very people who were supposed to be benefiting.

In the world of the conventional regeneration industry, of marinas and shopping centres, that would have been judged a success.

The reasons why conventional regeneration has failed so spectacularly are beyond the scope of this essay. But they are relevant here partly as the backdrop to the Big Local project and as a potential explanation for why it was designed in the way it was, with broad metrics of success connected with the ambitions of the people who live in the area. This is not, like some regeneration projects, an attempt simply to raise property values, or any other single metric; it is not an outside agenda imposed on the locals, like outsiders imposing the economic equivalent of the missionary position. This is not a programme about neatly checking people off on spreadsheets.

Without underestimating the huge resources, financial and human, that went into the New Deal for Communities projects – as well as the imagination required to do something different

– there is no doubt that the investment largely failed. Big Local wields a mere fraction of the money invested through the New Deal, but then it has no ambition to rebuild the physical fabric, unless that is the unequivocal will of the locals.

Even so, you only have to visit a handful of Big Local areas (as I have) to realise that the sources of change are as human, paradoxical and fleeting as Morris suggested they were. What makes Big Local different is that the human and paradoxical elements are placed centre stage in each of the 150 areas, and are not driven out by grinding KPI requirements. The residents who lead Big Local in their area have to agree plans with Local Trust over the years, and can access various training schemes and mutual support projects, but otherwise it is up to them.

As such, it is an extraordinary laboratory in which to look at how change works and doesn't work. Change is such a difficult issue for our generation – whether it is possible to drive it, personally or politically – that it is worth focusing on that element in particular.

I have emphasised different aspects in the three main places I have written about here, but they are actually represented in different ways everywhere I went. It may be that all three are necessary elements if human change is going to be possible at all.

In Blackpool, I was struck by the way that individual changes in confidence had been brought about, not so much by the project, but by getting involved in making change happen. It is enjoyably back-to-front, but it seems to be important.

In Leicester, I was fascinated by the way that tiny changes – picking up litter or organising coach trips to Skegness – were regarded as having generated the most change. Little things matter, as we saw also with the flower tubs in Revoe and the Lego club at the Arches.

In Chatham, it was the impact that one highly committed individual can make when they are properly supported, have a small budget and are maybe also without a car, so that they are constantly walking around at street level.

Change is elusive. It happens when we are not looking and then we wrestle with it when we are looking. Time itself provides us with growth and decay, the good and the bad, even when we do nothing. But are there levers we can use to take any kind of control, especially over the places we live in? That is not clear.

There were so many examples of positive change in these places, and two of them in particular broke the rules of how we expect conventional change, guided and supported by professionals, to work. Two of the Big Local administrators underwent profound personal changes because medical and welfare officials classified them as hopeless cases and it enraged them. You can't really extrapolate from those examples. It would imply a more personal and challenging model for welfare than most people would accept.

Or would it? It may be that what Stephen needed and Kathryn got was someone on their side, who would challenge them at the right time and support them at others, someone who would not try to categorise them, to slot them into a care package or the right pathway. It may be that the welfare system fails and wastes money to the extent that it fails to do this. It may be this is a sign that our institutions need to be a great deal more flexible.

But the immediate question is how the change brought about in these areas might be sustained after the million pounds is just a memory on an old bank statement.

That is to touch on a raw nerve in some of these Big Locals. The ones I visited were only a couple of years into

spending money, but are painfully aware that they are aiming at permanent change – perhaps in the form of a permanent centre or a permanent source of income. Sometimes they have not spent much so far, either because their spending has been frustrated or hoovered up by local officials; or because they set about it in different ways, using the money to draw in more. Sometimes the enormity of the task ahead paralyses them with the fear of waste.

There is no doubt as to the skill and commitment of the organisers I talked to. Everyone brings something unique to the role and is making a difference every day. But navigating around the issues of local economic sustainability, where there is no accepted theory to guide you, in neighbourhoods where most of the economic professionals or fund-raisers have long since upped and fled – that can be a serious challenge and it can sometimes feel unnerving.

It would be unnerving enough if there were tested theories out there. In practice, there are only disconnected bits, half-theories and suggestions, which somehow makes it worse.

Nor is having a million pounds "in the back pocket", as they say in Leicester, all sweetness and light either. It can attract the wrong people to start with. It can mean that professionals start gathering around your table with the wrong motives, giving dud advice – on security cameras or litter bins or cleaning contracts. It can also lead to bitter disagreements locally which have to be calmed and sorted.

To have been given the chance to spend a million pounds and not to waste it is a heavy burden to carry, like the One Ring to rule them all, in Lord of the Rings. These issues are rarely straightforward.

One Big Local area that has flexed its financial muscles is Woodlands Speaks in Doncaster. Perhaps it is a Yorkshire phenomenon – another nearby Big Local area, in Barnsley, is among those that have invested their money in buying homes, doing them up and renting them out for fair rent. But Woodlands has become the proud operator of a huge local library. (They also worked on a project to improve the council-owned Highfields Country Park, which led to the council supporting them to create a better green space.)

And what a library it is. It dominates the heart of the community, looking like a trendy 1960s church, with the sunlight glinting on the silver security baffles over the door and along the guttering – an attempt to stop young people climbing up the sloping roof.

"They called up and asked if Woodlands Speaks were interested in running the library on a voluntary basis, and that was that," says long-standing board member Pat Granby.

The fact that they now run the library, with meeting rooms, community spaces and a job advice centre attached, is a huge achievement. Doncaster Council now holds them responsible for a service-level agreement, which means they have to estimate how many new members they should attract, measure footfall and books taken out, and open for the hours stipulated. In return, they get a lease on the building and the council pays the gas, electricity bills and the business rates. The staff are all now enthusiastic volunteers.

But the new Woodlands Speaks manager, Stephanie Bramhald, also has ideas. The library already makes £6,000 a year on book fines and from selling books, tea and coffee. She has no illusions that the situation is at all sustainable and realises that the council will eventually want to get shot of the building completely, by which time it needs to be making enough to stay open.

So there will soon be a community café and a kitchen and probably a supply of home-made cakes. They also need a space to deliver training – job support is already a successful sideline under Mike Romano, the employment specialist who is working as a job coach for Woodlands Speaks Big Local.

Woodlands is an unusual place, next to one of the poorest estates in the UK, which also happens to be one of the most beautiful, and built next to the local coal mine along garden-city lines (the old winding gear is in the local churchyard).

It is also an example of the danger of local authorities subtly co-opting Big Local by withdrawing from local institutions – one of a number of threats that hang over these fledgling, economic mini-powerhouses.

There will undoubtedly be people, often in Whitehall, who fear that the money given with so few strings attached and so little oversight is liable to be wasted. The issue is sharper than that. It isn't about the danger of waste – that is part and parcel of the experiment being carried out – but the same problem as before: how small, impoverished neighbourhoods cope with the need for long-term sustainability without a theory to draw on about how to get there.

This is what makes the Big Local so English. The English suspicion of theory and ideology has never, for example, afflicted the French (more on that later).

But Woodlands Speaks does have a theory. It is as close to the mainstream as it is possible for radical thinking to get – which is that you need assets that can provide a long-term income, and coaching that can get people to rethink their lives enough to get them into jobs or into enterprises. Stephanie and Mike are going for this with energy and skill.

It is an effective theory and it may be correct, but it carries with it a problem. These areas don't really have assets or more

than a handful of businesses. They lack income streams that can be tapped. They could earn money from outside, but we already know that these are places that already find exporting skills quite tough enough.

That is one pitfall. There are others.

I find that one of the difficulties when you come to write about community projects is that there is always a danger of getting carried away by the rhetoric, so that you miss what is really going on.

There is a particular community development language, and it may be a fantasy, that sets great store by the idea of local people 'coming together' – as they put it – and deciding a whole range of issues and making them happen, as if this was a spontaneous action. It is an idea that goes back to Rousseau, that people can manage better on their own because they know best what needs to happen.

It is true, but only partly true. It also comes with a whole load of romantic baggage which regards the ideal community as one that thinks and feels as one, as if it was bursting with life and conviction, like George Orwell's Junior Anti-Sex League in 1984. In fact, if people live isolated lives in cities, that is at least partly because they want to escape the curtain-twitching, negative elements of living in close-knit neighbourhoods.

The other problem is that it comes slap bang into conflict with another Fabian idea, which is that poor people can do virtually nothing by themselves and require full professional support from an all-powerful state apparatus.

Both of these can't possibly be completely true, but there are elements of truth in both. It is an argument among the Left that tends not to be challenged, and this unaddressed division of opinion can make poorer communities particularly vulnerable to spending cuts.

When Big Local was at the planning stage, it may not have been apparent what would be happening to local government, not just the reduction of services but also the reduction of staffing. Partnership with local government can now be extremely hard because there sometimes seems to be nobody there.

"Councils are under such tremendous pressures," says Andrew Walker from Revoe. "They have had millions and millions cut and that has an effect. Before, we might have worked with an officer and it might take them a bit of time. Now they've got other responsibilities and they are drowning."

There is another worry, that the crisis in local government will simply suck up the million pounds allocated to each area. Doncaster Council has managed to offload its country park, then its library, onto Woodlands Speaks. The demise of its official youth service looks set to take up more of the budget, just as it has in Revoe. It is hard not to suspect that, having failed to take control of the million pounds – Stephen Perez reported the files slamming on the table and the storming out when officials found they could not – local government has simply found a more effective method.

That is a cynical view. It is likely to have been cock-up rather than conspiracy, but it is still a serious threat to the experiment – that the million pounds will simply represent a stay of execution for local life before the darkness falls.

However much we might admire the bravery of Big Local and those involved on the ground, and the things they are achieving, collectively and individually, we have to be honest about the threats. A million pounds sounds a large amount when it is offered, and it is when it remains what Tim Morton called "the icing on the cake". But it doesn't go very far if it has to be stretched to replace the cake as well.

This simply underlines the vital importance of an enduring legacy, which will have to survive not just the end of the Big Local programme, but the end of local government as we know it.

What is fascinating about the elusive issue of sustainability is that local government is wrestling with it too, at the same time.

What Big Local areas have going for them are partly the roots they have planted into the neighbourhood, and partly their local knowledge. But there might be a potential community of interest with the surviving cadre of entrepreneurial local government officers, which is just beginning to emerge, somewhat fitfully. They both need to know more about how to help neighbourhoods drag themselves back to life using local resources, when they have the human resources – battered but unbowed – but not the financial or the property ones.

Can it be done? There are examples around the world – the community banks of Brazil, the linked co-operatives of Mondragon – but not many. Here is an agenda that needs an alliance of interest.

I emphasised the importance of getting the little things right to make a big difference, especially from what I saw working in St Matthew's in Leicester, where they had been talking about the unexpected impact of two coach trips to Skegness.

There is a theory here, of course: known colloquially as 'broken windows' and first published in Atlantic Monthly in 1980. It formed the basis of both the revitalisation of New York City, pushing out the crime, and a great deal of modern policing. The idea is that small elements of disorder, or vandalism left unrepaired, usually attract greater disorder.

But there is an emerging critique of broken windows theory in the USA which argues that it is too culturally unspecific. One person's disorder might be someone else's culture, after all. The main critic is a Chicago sociologist, Robert Sampson, who based this view on his monumental study of violent crime in his home city in 1997.

He divided Chicago up into hundreds of small neighbourhoods to study why violent crime was high in some places but not others, and found there was no socio-economic explanation at all. What made the difference, he said, was that low-violence areas had developed what he called 'collective efficacy'. He meant that there seemed to be a tendency there for adults to intervene if they saw young people hanging about. It was not that they were braver there, just that they knew people and, as a result, gathered some natural authority.

This confirms just how important a figure like Stephen Perez can be in a neighbourhood. Not just his attention to street-level detail, or his wide acquaintanceships, but what the management guru Tom Peters has called an ability to do MBWA – management by walking around.

The problem is finding the right combination of people, and not expecting Stephen or anyone else to dedicate the rest of their lives to walking the beat. Stephen says he feels motivated primarily by realising that his children need somewhere safer to grow up, but he also recognises that they will eventually grow up. Personally, from what I know of activism of any kind, most people require a break at least once a decade to recharge and rethink.

Stephen also has the advantage of a million pounds behind him. Even if he hardly spends a penny of it, it gives him a natural authority of another kind. People respect money. They shouldn't, but we all know they do. Even if it isn't his.

The other two themes of this essay bear closer examination too. What kind of institution would look after the little things, in a way that is proving so transformative in St Matthew's? There have been experiments with institutionalising this kind of small-scale philanthropy, again through local councillors, by giving them small budgets to spend in their wards.

This is a good idea but it has hardly set neighbourhoods on fire. It is tempting to suspect that it lacks the participative budgeting element that is so important to Big Local.

Finally, what kind of institution can embed the transformational element that emerges when people who were the object of volunteering or welfare suddenly become its agents? That was a feature in Blackpool, but you see it everywhere. It goes to the heart, not so much of mutualism – which implies institutional arrangements – as of broad mutuality. It implies what the co-production pioneer Edgar Cahn maintains: that human beings have a basic need, and perhaps also a basic right, to feel useful.

Behind this is the heart-wrenching theme of how much people long to live with tidiness and beauty: the older couple who begged Stephen not to beautify the Luton Millennium Green because it would break their hearts when it was ruined again; Brian from Revoe, told off by the police for asking two nurses not to throw their car litter into the street.

It is beyond the scope of this short contribution to discuss how the right to a better enviroment might be institutionalised. It seems to me to require a mechanism embedded in public services, but also independent of them, which can provide broad continuity – through time banks, or health champions, or all those other emerging ways that mean people can make a contribution as part of their own recovery.

I find, now I have reached the end, that I can hardly stop thinking about the two people I met who had both turned their lives around from deep, implacable and apparently incurable chronic conditions.

They did so by refusing to accept their own patterns of behaviour, by deciding one moment to become somebody different. It flies in the face of so much of contemporary culture, which seems to value identity above all, that they asserted their right to be somebody altogether different.

So here are some questions we need to ask. How can we make that kind of change available more widely when people want it? And might that possibility be available for neighbourhoods too? Could somewhere decide suddenly, in an act of will and with a great deal of effort, to be somewhere different?

Because that is the purpose behind Big Local, as I see it – and it leads to the possibility of change that is held out, bravely, without instructions, targets or theory. It is monumentally English in its refusal to instruct or theorise, but it is still revolutionary. It is probably the most important and ambitious community development experiment ever undertaken in the UK.

It ought to be better known. We all ought to be watching, white-knuckled, to see how it works.

It is the very absence of theory that, paradoxically, makes it so exciting. It provides a freedom to innovate that has been absent from similar experiments before. It may also provide an antidote to the iron rule of philanthropy, which would normally see fifty of the sites succeeding, fifty failing and fifty doing OK. But it also provides no signposts – partly, of course, because there is no sophisticated theory about what they are attempting to do that is widely understood, let alone accepted.

When the French government launched the Total Fonds d'Expérimentation in 2009, it had offered a similarly open-ended invitation. But the Hollande administration replaced it with the much more tightly controlled and regulated La France s'engage. These two elements war with each other in ambitious schemes – open-mindedness versus focus, enthusiasm versus theory. It may be that, as the decade progresses, a similar shift takes place in Big Local, perhaps more than once. If so, I hope the emphasis continues to be on broad experimentation and variety to produce a theory, rather than the other way around.

Perhaps then, by the end, we will not just have 150 communities newly confident and able to fish for themselves, but we will also know a good deal more about the mysterious and elusive grammar of change.

"The fear of regret sometimes paralyses people from doing anything at all, because to have done nothing means you have to regret nothing. We need to give people the opportunity to get things wrong – and to do something."

Stephen, Arches Big Local area, Kent

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as 'perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK'.

In this lively account of visits to Big Local areas in Kent, Blackpool, Leicester and Doncaster, David Boyle examines the powerful stories of the residents involved and challenges established ideas about what it takes to create local change.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

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